TRUSTING GOVERNMENTS

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Category: Opinions

By Avedis Kevorkian, Philadelphia PA, 15 November 2008

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Recently, I read an essay on the current situation in Washington, the election, and the new administration, in which the author asked the question: "Can we trust our government?"

It got me to thinking--or what passes for thinking in my feeble brain--and I put down the magazine and wondered why the question pulled me up short.

After a few minutes, I realized that it had recalled to my mind a story that my father had told me following one of his visits--the last one, I think--to Soviet Armenia.

As publisher/editor of a *Chezok* (independent, for non-Armenians out there) newspaper for 43 years, he was much respected in Armenia for the very reason that he was independent. Thus, he received a sort of VIP treatment and was permitted a degree of unfettered travel and association that other visitors may not have received.

During one of his visits around, he met someone who invited him to his home, and my father accepted. After dinner, my father and his host were alone--the wife being in the kitchen cleaning up--and the man explained the real reason for his invitation.

He had a problem.

About a year earlier, he had made his usual Thursday visit to the local baths (apparently it was still an institution in those days) and in the changing room he had found a 10-rouble note (which, in those days was equivalent to $10 and a great deal of money in Armenia). Discreetly, he asked people if they had lost any money, and none had. He pocketed the money and eventually returned home.

He answered his wife's "Anything interesting at the baths?" with the observation that he had found a 10-rouble note. "But, of course, you tried to find the owner of it," his wife said, and he replied that he had. Then she asked who had been there. Slowly they eliminated everyone, when the man realized that as he had entered he had met leaving the baths the director of the factory where he had worked and who had fired him about a year earlier. They agreed that it had to have been his money.

So, he called the director, and asked if he had lost any money at the baths. The director said that he had lost a 10-rouble note. The man said that he had found it and would return it to him, knowing where he lived. The director said not to bother, that the man should keep it, since it was really his anyway. The man was puzzled, but insisted that he would go to the director's home and

return it.

He went, was received warmly, and tried to hand the director the 10-rouble note. The director refused, and invited the man to sit and brought out the inevitable bottle of vodka. Over drinks, the director explained that the man was one of his best workers and the reason that he had fired him was that the man was not a member of the Party and seemed to think independently and, besides, the director explained, after he had fired the man he had not taken the man off the factory pay-roll and that he--the director--had been pocketing the man's pay. "So," the director explained, "the money is really yours." Then, he went on, "And since I really am sorry that I fired you, I will send you half your pay each month because you are also an honest man."

My father said that he had listened quietly to the story and asked if the man had done anything about it--reported it or anything else.

"No," the man said. "I did protest that I wanted no money from the director, and I told the director that what he was doing was cheating. And, would you believe, Ungehr Kevorkian," the man said, "what he replied?"

My amazed father said "No."

"He said, 'cheating the government is not cheating'!"

Before my father could say anything, the man said "And every month, I have been receiving half the pay that I used to get when I was working there."

My father said that he was speechless. And the man continued, "That is one of the reasons that I invited you, Ungehr. What should I do? He refused to accept the 10-rouble note, he refuses to stop sending the money, I dare not put it in the bank because I may be asked where I got the money, I dare not spend it because people may ask where I got the extra money, I dare not report him because who knows what will happen to me."

By then the man's wife had come into the room and having heard the tale-end of the story, said "I tell him to burn it."

After a few minutes, my father said that they had exhausted all the possibilities, and he decided that it was time to leave. "I don't know what the poor honest man did or is doing about it," he said to me.

What has stayed with me all those years is the director's comment: "Cheating the government is not cheating." Think long and hard on that. Think what is the real message behind it.

When government--by its actions, by its corruption, by its disdain for the people, by its lies and its mendacity--loses the respect of the people in whose name it is supposed to be governing, the people show their reaction by losing all respect for government and those who are part of that government. And, it has nothing to do with the politics of the government and who is in and who is out of government. Since I am on the subject, permit me to insert, here, a quote that has been aching to get out of my head. It is by

Thucydides (fifth-century-BC historian): "In a war, a politician is better able to disguise his crimes against the people." (Anybody we know?)

After recalling my father's story, I answered the author's question by saying to myself, "I couldn't trust this one. I hope that I can trust the next one." And, I went on to finish the essay.

And then I sat down to write this.